

EXPLAINING TRAJECTORIES OF MUNICIPAL AMALGAMATIONS: A CASE COMPARISON OF THE NETHERLANDS AND FLANDERS

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Wout Broekema, Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University

Trui Steen, Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University and KU Leuven Public Governance Institute

Ellen Wayenberg, Department of Political Science, Ghent University

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INTRODUCTION

Based on the rationale of increasing administrative power and obtaining efficiency through economies of scale, municipal upscaling in Western European states has intensified in recent years. Despite this general tendency the specific trajectories of municipal amalgamations vary strongly between countries. Sometimes local government re-scaling evolves incrementally, sometimes it occurs in a more drastic way, or not at all. So far these differences in trajectories have not been satisfactorily explained. There have been a number of studies describing the amalgamation process or analyzing the effects (mostly financial) in specific countries (e.g., Dollery *et al.* 2004; Reingewertz 2012; Kjaer *et al.* 2010; Kushner and Siegel 2005). Comparative explanatory studies between countries, however, remain scarce and fragmented (exceptions: Steiner 2003; Brundgaard and Vrangbæk 2007; De Peuter *et al.* 2011). This is remarkable in light of the important and growing role of local governments in delivering goods, services, and democratic values to citizens.

This chapter explores *what factors help to explain the differences in municipal amalgamation trajectories between Western European countries*, on the basis of a comparative case study of the Netherlands and Flanders. The chapter fits in with the LocRef research, which aims at understanding national trajectories of reform through international comparison. Despite a number of policy evaluations, academic studies on municipal mergers in the Low Countries have been scarce (exceptions are Toonen *et al.* 1998; De Ceuninck *et al.* 2010; Smulders 2012; Abma 2013). After a discussion of the analytical framework and research design we provide a brief overview of municipal amalgamations in the two cases, followed by an in-depth analysis of the factors explaining amalgamation trajectories in the Netherlands and Flanders. We conclude by listing the factors we found crucial for explaining amalgamation trajectories.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We took a predominantly inductive approach, using a wide analytical framework as starting point. The model proposed by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) provides a general insight into factors influencing public management reform. It includes (1) socio-economic forces, such as economic forces, socio-economic policies, and socio-demographic change; (2) the political system, including deep-structural features of the system, as well as dynamic elements such as new management ideas, pressures from citizens, and party political ideas; (3) elite decision making on what is desirable and feasible; (4) change events, such as scandals or disasters; and (5) the administrative system, covering content of reforms, implementation, and results.

Municipal amalgamations are highly complex and case-embedded processes, in which multiple factors interact. We argue that to do justice to this complexity an in-depth case study is required first, to function as basis for more (quantitative) research in the future, and therefore opted for a comparative in-depth case study design. We selected the Dutch and Flanders cases on the basis of a

most-similar-systems design (Lijphart 1971). In the Netherlands, municipal amalgamations have been occurring in an incremental way, while in Flanders in the past decades no municipal amalgamations have occurred at all. Although we see contrasting trajectories of municipal amalgamations (dependent variable), both cases have relatively similar government systems and cultures.

The analytic model provides wide categories that help to structure our comparison. The two cases were systematically compared on the factors outlined above for the period 1996-2015. We used this time frame to limit the number of intervening variables that play a role, especially because the government system in Belgium has changed substantially. We present the findings in the form of a thick description, which does justice to the complex contextual situation: factors are complex; they have divergent explanatory powers, abstraction levels, and levels of analysis; and they are often deeply interwoven with each other. We integrated data from secondary sources: academic articles, evaluation reports, policy documents, statistical monitors, and newspaper articles.

DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES OF MUNICIPAL AMALGAMATIONS

Incremental change vs large waves

In the Netherlands, the number of municipalities has been gradually decreasing over a long time, starting as early as the 19th century. More recently, the number of municipalities dropped from 913 in 1970, via 811 in 1980, 625 in 1996, and 537 in 2000, to 393 on January 1 2015 (CBS 2015). The gradualness of the amalgamation process in the Netherlands is noteworthy: although the outcome fits in with the general trend of municipal mergers in most of Western Europe, for a few decades the Netherlands lagged behind many other countries as regards increasing the local government scale, until the beginning of the 1990s (Toonen *et al.* 1998).

TABLE 1 *Number of municipalities in the Netherlands over the period 1996-2005*

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number of municipalities	625	572	548	538	537	504	496	489	483	467
Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Number of municipalities	458	443	443	441	431	418	415	408	403	393

Source CBS 2014

Although in Flanders the number of municipalities also dropped drastically in the 20th century, the reform process unfolded along a completely different path. The number of municipalities stayed relatively stable until 1961, after which re-scaling took place in large waves of reforms. In 1961, the Unity Law gave the Executive the authority to abolish municipalities. As a result, over the period 1961-1971 the number of municipalities in Belgium decreased from 2663 to 2359 (Wayenberg and De Rynck 2007). In 1976, through a large-scale reform of municipal amalgamations, the number of municipalities in Belgium dropped from 2359 to 596 (De Ceuninck 2009). After the 1976 reform, no

significant municipal re-scaling has taken place. In 1983, the city of Antwerp merged with seven surrounding municipalities. Since then, the number of municipalities has not changed, with 308 of the 589 Belgian municipalities situated in Flanders (De Ceuninck e.a. 2010; De Peuter e.a. 2011). The average number of inhabitants per municipality in Flanders is 20,720 (ABB 2014b). Strong efforts on the part of the Flanders regional government in recent years to initiate municipal amalgamations have so far proved unsuccessful (Coalition agreement 2009; ABB 2014a).

The different trends resulted in an average number of inhabitants per municipality in 2014 of 41,760 in the Netherlands versus 20,720 in Flanders (CBS 2014; ABB 2014b).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FORCES

Austerity government in times of crisis

When we consider socio-economic forces as a possible explanation for municipal amalgamations in the Netherlands and Flanders we find that especially economic factors play a role. As in other European countries, the recent economic recession puts financial pressure on the public sector as a whole. With the appointment of austerity governments budget cuts have been implemented and efficiency programs were run. The Dutch national government aims at cutting 180 million on municipalities in 2017, along with the general austerities amounting to an estimated 307 million a year (Boon 2013), creating an estimated financial deficit for the local government of 6.1 billion euros in 2017 (Allers *et al.* 2013). To enhance efficiency, the government has adopted the policy to radically reform the local and regional government structure in the coming years. In a similar way, in Flanders budget cuts were put through and the Flemish government runs a policy of local and regional scale reforms, including, for example, a radical cutback of competencies at the provincial level, and a forced policy of merging local administration and social policy administration (separate until now) at the level of cities and municipalities. In both cases, municipalities need to reduce their expenses drastically. One possibility to keep performing their tasks is to make use of scale benefits by merging with neighboring municipalities.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Deep-structural features of the government system: consensus vs consensus in the making

In the Netherlands the relationship between national and local government is based on a mix of autonomy, co-governance, and supervision. Although in certain areas local governments can take own initiatives (autonomy), and mostly carry out policies made at a higher level (co-governance), national government has the power to overrule local decisions (supervision) (Breeman *et al.* 2012). For the execution of national policies national government is highly dependent on the quality and cooperation of local governments. As a result, the intergovernmental relations in the Netherlands are not so much based on formal hierarchy as on consensus (the so-called 'polder model'). This model typically leads

to incremental pragmatic changes, or, if there is no consensus, to things remaining as they were (Toonen and Steen 2010a; 2010b). When it comes to municipal amalgamations this works in two directions. On the one hand, it seems to facilitate local government reform, because municipalities cooperate with the national government in reaching goals, in this case larger municipalities. The consensus system results in an incremental reform process of municipal re-scaling, which has the effect that resistance is also spread over the years. On the other hand, the system makes it more difficult to impose reforms on municipalities. The culture of intergovernmental bargaining requires national government to follow an intensive path of consultation and persuasion on the local level in order to get reforms accepted.

Historically, Belgium is more centralized, with municipalities having limited formal competences and autonomy (Wayenberg and De Rynck 2007). However, over the past decades the system has been subject to a process of federalization. As a result, regional government currently plays a central role in supervising and regulating local governments within its territory. In 2005, the Flemish region adopted a Municipal Decree which created more autonomy for local governments in Flanders. The Flemish government stresses the issue of local autonomy and has pledged to transform the system of intergovernmental management, from ‘control’ to ‘support’ and ‘partnership’. However, in reality the traditionally highly centralized system and culture in which municipalities were told what to do still has its impact. This helps to explain reform conservatism, especially in smaller municipalities, the target group for amalgamations, of which there are a relatively high number in Flanders.

Decentralization of tasks

A closely related factor characterizing the intergovernmental system is the division of competencies between government levels. In the Netherlands, due to a series of decentralizations the number of municipalities’ tasks has steadily grown over the past decades. Current policy is directly related to the economic context and austerity programs described above. In 2014 the national government decided to decentralize three major social welfare tasks to the local level (CPB 2013). However, municipalities often do not have sufficient scale and scope to carry out these tasks, and neither do they receive the corresponding share of financial resources to perform them. As a result, decentralizations push municipalities to upscale and closely cooperate or merge with surrounding municipalities. In this way the decentralization to some degree again leads to centralization, a process known as the ‘decentralization paradox’.

In Flanders, the decentralization of tasks has been less pronounced. Yet here, too, the trend is towards increasing numbers of tasks and competencies at local level. While the Flemish government promised that every decentralization would take place in consultation with local government and would be accompanied with the transfer of necessary means, personnel, and financial resources (Coalition Agreement 2014-2019: 33), the question arises to what extent this will put additional stress on municipalities to cooperate and/or merge in the (near) future.

Local politics and identity

Additionally, characteristics of the local political system also play a role. Especially in Flanders, both local government officials and citizens fear the loss of local identity and being swallowed up by larger neighboring municipalities. The imposed reforms of 1976 led to the disappearance of many municipalities, as these became part of configurations mostly identified with the largest community. For the new municipality often the name of the largest municipality was taken. In Belgium citizens feel more connected with their local identity, whereas in the Netherlands citizens experience a stronger connection to the state (Van Ostaaijen 2007). The former creates a form of conservatism. However, this is not to say that in the Netherlands the issue of local identity is of no importance. Every now and then, when plans for specific municipal mergers are initiated, the topic of ‘municipal re-scaling’ becomes politicized and meets with resistance, especially when small municipalities merge with an adjacent larger urban community (Vriesema 2014).

A strong local leader with the political will to implement reform can mitigate local resistance by means of communication and persuasion (ABB 2014a: 10). Although in many respects the position of mayor in the Netherlands resembles that in Flanders, there are some important differences. Compared to the Netherlands, in Flanders the mayor is more connected with his/her own municipal area and politics. In the Netherlands the office of mayor is seen much more as a step towards other government positions. Mayors in Flanders in general have a more political function and to a greater extent represent the local identity. This is reflected in the fact that mayors have a vote in the local council, are appointed from the local council, and the ‘power distance’ is great (Van Ostaaijen 2007). The appointment of a mayor is strongly based on the results of the local elections, whereas in the Netherlands a new mayor is often appointed from outside the municipality. Due to these institutional differences, we expect Flemish local officials to be more afraid than their Dutch counterparts of losing their position if a municipality is to merge with surrounding municipalities, and therefore sooner try to stall it. As an interesting fact of local politics, almost half of the mayors in the Netherlands support the idea of larger municipalities (Logtenberg and Vriesema 2014).

ELITE DECISION MAKING

Under the heading of ‘elite decision making’ Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) discuss the issue of what reforms are found desirable and feasible as an explanatory factor for reform. First we will discuss the main arguments concerning municipal amalgamations that are used at central and local level. Next, we outline how, in both cases, central¹ government is pressuring for reform and so intensifies the debate.

Why are amalgamations desirable?

¹ Because we are comparing the Netherlands (country) and Flanders (region), we use the term ‘central government’ here to denote the Dutch national and Flemish regional governments, respectively.

In the Netherlands and Flanders the main arguments used by central government in favor of municipal amalgamations are similar and clear-cut: increased administrative power and economies of scale. At the same time, it is thought that municipal amalgamations bring the administration closer to the citizen, because it makes it easier to provide services (for example online) (BZK 2013a; Flemish Government 2010). Especially given the scope of current decentralizations in the Netherlands, mergers are viewed as a solution (CPB 2013). Another argument used is administrative crowdedness, a discussion that accompanies the discussion in both the Netherlands and Flanders about a reform of the provincial level of government. Interestingly, Flanders seems to take the lead here, because the current government drastically cut the competencies of the provinces, whereas the Dutch government so far has not achieved sufficient support for its plan to merge provinces into larger 'country-regions'.

In both cases, Local governments themselves are less convinced than the central governments of the benefits of amalgamations. However, in the Netherlands it seems local levels agree more often than those in Flanders that amalgamations are needed and urgent, especially if municipalities are to cope with increased tasks as a result of recent decentralizations.

External political pressure by the central government and an intensified debate

As a result of the considerations outlined above, in both our cases central governments implicitly and explicitly push for municipal amalgamations. In its 2012 coalition agreement the Dutch government stated that it would aim at creating larger municipalities. In 2009, and again in 2014, the coalition agreements of the Flemish government strongly encouraged voluntary municipal amalgamations. Both governments exert influence in a similar way, by political pressure and by initiating a broad societal debate, and by setting the outline for municipal reorganizations. The Dutch Ministry of the Interior created a formal policy framework in 2013, issued a handbook for municipal amalgamations (BZK 2014), and assesses proposals for amalgamations. The Flemish government drew up a framework to support voluntary municipal amalgamations (Flemish government 2010), and a white book on internal state reform (Flemish government 2011). Moreover, a blueprint model was created to guide municipalities through approaching amalgamations (KPMG and Eubelius 2011). The Flemish administration published an memorandum on how to create a stronger local government in the near future (ABB 2014a). Currently, the government is funding research aimed at providing a practical handbook for local reform, including municipal amalgamations.

In the Netherlands, political pressure from central government is expressed by Minister Plasterk's strong words in the mass media, expressing clear goals concerning municipal amalgamations. Central government announced its aim to increase the number of municipal amalgamations by a factor two, i.e., from 10 to 20 per year (Boon 2013). To a certain extent municipalities are pressured into merging, as illustrated by the municipalities that merged with Alphen aan den Rijn in 2014 despite strong resistance on their part (Vriesema 2014). Dutch central government has also created a financial incentive for amalgamations, providing financial support to

the amount of €400,000 per municipality. This sum, which can be up to 10 percent of what municipalities receive from the Municipal Fund, can cover part of the friction costs arising from the merge of organizations (BZK 2013b; Bekkers and Koster 2013).

Similarly, the Flemish government also exercised political pressure, and took several actions to encourage municipal amalgamations and fuel the debate on the topic. First, it promised both substantive and financial assistance to municipalities that would decide to merge on 1 January 2013. The 2014-2019 coalition agreement has again stated it would encourage voluntary mergers by financial support. Second, in its new policy the Flemish government stresses the issue of local autonomy. Most interesting, however, in the context of local government re-scaling is the intention to differentiate between municipalities in terms of their population, and to increase autonomy and grant additional tasks to medium-size and big cities and municipalities (Coalition Agreement 2014-2019: 32-33). In contrast to the Netherlands, however, the active role of the Flemish government in promoting municipal amalgamations and initiating an intensive public and political debate on the topic has not yet resulted in actual mergers. Smulders (2012: 73) suggests that the higher degree of financial autonomy held by Flemish municipalities diminishes central government's potential to steer the local level. Nonetheless, the Flemish government is hoping the incentives will have a catalyzing effect on municipal amalgamations in the near future.

CHANGE EVENTS

The municipal amalgamation wave of 1976 still helps to explain why there have been no municipal amalgamations in Flanders in the past decades. The mergers were imposed by the Belgian central government in a highly top-down process, in which preferences from the local level itself were taken into only limited account. Strong political resistance from many municipalities could not prevent the decisions from being implemented. The forced reforms met with many problems and critics (De Ceuninck 2013). Although the reforms were implemented almost thirty years ago, they have stuck in the minds: government officials are still referring to the problems encountered then, which still create resistance to change at this moment.

ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

Under the heading of 'administrative system' Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) discuss the content of reform packages, processes of implementation, and achievements accruing from reforms. In our analysis, two factors stand out: first, the extent to which decisions on and implementations of amalgamations are a bottom-up process; second, the issue of inter-municipal cooperation as an alternative for or step towards amalgamation.

A bottom-up process?

In the Netherlands the initiative for municipal amalgamations formally lies with the local level, as set out in the ‘General Rules Reorganization’ Law (1984) and adopted in the ‘Policy Framework Municipal Reorganization’ (BZK 2013a). The national government explicitly stresses that municipal re-scaling is a bottom-up process (BZK 2013b). The idea is that municipal reforms can only be successful if initiated at local level, if consultations are done at local level, and the reform has the voluntary support of local authorities (BZK 2013a; 2014). In some cases the provincial level is involved in this process. In Flanders, likewise, municipal amalgamations are formally a bottom-up process. The voluntary initiation of amalgamations by municipalities is included in the Municipal Decree. Formally, municipalities are free to initiate municipal amalgamations. The Flemish government stresses that amalgamations should be initiated by the local level, as set out in a framework for supporting voluntary municipal amalgamations (Flemish government 2010; ABB 2014a).

Seen from a formal rules perspective, municipal amalgamations are predominantly a bottom-up process. The voluntary initiation of municipal mergers may explain the incremental trajectory of municipal amalgamations in the Netherlands. Although the formal rules in Flanders are rather similar, efforts by the Flemish government to initiate municipal amalgamations have not been successful. An explanation might be that in Flanders current rules on municipal amalgamations have only been in place for a few years. Municipalities need some time to get used to the new reform ideas. Moreover, the wide experience with best practices of implementing amalgamations that is available in the Netherlands provides support for municipalities that start a reform process, something that cannot be said of the situation in Flanders (Smulders, 2012). This makes experience a distinguishing factor.

Intermunicipal cooperations: an alternative and/or first step?

Intermunicipal cooperation (IMC) has taken place in the Netherlands ever since municipalities were established. Recent decentralizations have drawn extra attention to IMC because municipalities are often unable to perform new tasks on their own, and IMCs are viewed as an alternative to amalgamations when it comes to dealing with these new challenges (Herweijer and Fraanje 2011). Motivations to initiate IMCs resemble the motivations for amalgamations: to create efficiency profits through scale benefits, and to gain the expertise necessary to handle new complex tasks. Moreover, IMCs enable especially the smaller municipalities to retain their local identity. At the same time, in the Netherlands IMCs are seen as a first step towards amalgamations, because intensified cooperation on multiple topics makes a subsequent merger less drastic.

Within the context of the debate on municipal amalgamations in Flanders, the impact of structural reforms on ‘democracy’ is clearly more of an issue than in the Netherlands. This is discussed in the context of local government being a democratically legitimized actor, unlike forms of IMC which have not been democratically legitimized through direct elections. The Flemish government coalition agreement 2014-2019, for example, states that ‘Flanders will install new forms

of cooperation only if an extensive note of motivation demonstrates that the policy aims intended cannot be realized within an existing cooperation' (2014: 35). Here, IMCs are seen as inhibiting rather than facilitating amalgamations. The attention given to IMCs rather than amalgamations during the period 1976-2009 has resulted in a distinct path-dependence effect, making it difficult to re-initiate municipal amalgamations (Smulders, 2012).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Although there has been a general trend towards local government mergers in Western European countries, with an upsurge in recent years, the trajectories of municipal amalgamations vary widely per country. Comparative research has been limited and fragmented, despite the importance of local government for providing goods, services, and legitimacy. Through a comparative in-depth analysis of the Netherlands and Flanders we explored what factors can help to explain the differences between trajectories of municipal amalgamations, as a starting point for understanding why municipal amalgamations do or do not occur.

We found a vast number of factors that were influential, often overlapping and interdependent. In both cases, the external economic context can be viewed as an underlying driving force for municipal amalgamations. Central governments are confronted with a global financial recession, making them implement budget cuts on the local level. This creates an incentive for creating scale efficiency through larger municipalities. The rational arguments used in both cases are to a large extent similar: increased administrative power and benefits from economies of scale. Also, despite the fact that in both cases amalgamations are formally bottom-up processes, central governments exert great external pressure to adopt amalgamations, by setting the outline for the process, providing incentives, and initiating societal debate.

These factors seem influential, but they apply to both cases and so apparently cannot serve to explain the differences between the amalgamation trajectories in the Netherlands and Flanders. What then are the main factors that explain these different trajectories? First, the incremental trajectory of municipal amalgamations in the Netherlands can be explained by the consensus system of intergovernmental bargaining. Municipalities and national government cooperate when realizing goals, yet the system also requires intensive consultation and persuasion. Second, whereas in Flanders there have been some decentralizations, in the Netherlands much more drastic decentralizations are put through. Decentralization of tasks puts immediate pressure on municipalities to increase scale in order to be able to carry out the new tasks, which makes it a major explanatory factor for trajectories of municipal amalgamations. Third, the incremental reform trajectory in the Netherlands can be explained by path-dependence. Wide experience with best practices, for example, supports the initiation of new reform projects. The higher resistance to municipal amalgamations in Flanders can also be explained historically, because the large national top-down municipal amalgamations imposed in 1976 stopped the need for municipal amalgamations for a while, and is still a cause of resistance.

The traditionally strongly centralized system also helps to explain local reform conservatism. Additionally, the fact that thus far Flemish government has not succeeded in initiating municipal amalgamations seems partly explained by differences in the local political system and identity between the Netherlands and Flanders. In Flanders, local identity plays a more important role, among other reasons because the role of the mayor is much more connected with his/her own municipality, which creates a form of conservatism. Finally, IMCs provide no clear explanation for trajectories of municipal amalgamations, because an IMC can be an alternative to or a first step towards municipal amalgamation, i.e., a facilitator or an inhibitor.

Can our findings provide a first explanation for trajectories of municipal amalgamations, even beyond our two cases? It is clear that amalgamation trajectories are highly complex and very much embedded in the case-specific contexts. Our findings suggest that major factors influencing municipal amalgamations trajectories relate to an explanation of path dependence (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Path dependence provides an explanation for incremental reform, reform shocks, and deadlock. It also explains differences in alternatives, for example, installing IMCs rather than mergers. We saw that the financial crisis and economic situation functioned as a rationale for reform, which can also be seen as a ‘change event’. The same goes for related large decentralizations in the Netherlands that provided a ‘shock’ for local government. In contrast, in Flanders the 1976 reform was a major change event, still explaining the current deadlock. Similarly, there is an institutional path-dependent explanation for the influence of the intergovernmental system and for local government characteristics – e.g., local identity and leadership.

Because our findings are based on an in-depth study of two cases their generalizability may be limited. We found that the factors affecting the trajectories of municipal amalgamations are closely interwoven, and we realize that categorizations can be made in many other ways. In addition, we are aware that the effects of current dynamics in both cases are as yet unknown. We propose further research on the topic, also including more countries in the analysis and looking into differences between municipalities in one country. The overview of factors involved, and our conclusion that path dependency is a highly relevant framework for studying trajectories of municipal amalgamations, may form a point of departure for future research. However, the complexity of amalgamation processes carries the threat of easy oversimplification. Our conclusion, therefore, is that the deeper processes must be understood as a basis for studies that use more simplified, quantified data.

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